From kinship to kingship: an African journey into complexity

Pierre de Maret [a]

[a] Université Libre de Bruxelles and Musée Royal de l'Afrique
Centrale, CP 124, Avenue F.D. Roosevelt 50, 1050, Brussels,
Belgium

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From kinship to kingship: an African journey into complexity

Pierre de Maret*

Université Libre de Bruxelles and Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, CP 124, Avenue F.D. Roosevelt 50, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

In Africa, where kinship provided the underlying structure of society, social networks and ritual power appear to be at the core of the notion of power and the emergence of political complexity. In studying those developments, and how African political systems challenged simplistic neo-evolutionary models as they kept moving back and forth from lineage to kingdom, it may be useful to focus first on understanding how egalitarian societies became centralised states with a king. Although many famous kingdoms of the continent have flourished in the past, little is known about their origins. In order to use archaeology to study those processes, we need a better understanding of the nature of kingship, and thus to find ways to identify the sacred dimension of power in the African archaeological record. In that perspective, we should focus on the remains of palaces and precolonial cities, as well as on burial centres and regalia.

Keywords: Kingship; political complexity; sacred power; palaces; pre-colonial cities; regalia

En Afrique, où la parenté fournit la structure de base de la société, les réseaux sociaux et le pouvoir rituel semblent être au coeur de la notion de pouvoir et de l'émergence de la complexité politique. En étudiant ces développements et la façon dont les systèmes politiques africains contredisent les modèles néo-évolutionnistes simplistes par des allers-retours entre le lignage et le royaume, il peut être utile de s'attacher d'abord à comprendre comment des sociétés égalitaires sont devenues des états centralisés avec un roi. Bien que beaucoup de royaumes célèbres aient fleuri dans le passé du continent, on connaît peu de choses sur leurs origines. Si l'on veut utiliser l'archéologie pour éclairer celles-ci, nous devons mieux comprendre la nature de la royauté et donc trouver des façons d'identifier la dimension sacrée du pouvoir dans les vestiges archéologiques en Afrique. Dans cette perspective, on doit s'intéresser particulièrement aux restes des palais et des cités précoloniales, comme aux tombeaux et aux regalia.

Introduction

Graham Connah should be praised for having very early on, and repeatedly, called our attention to the importance of the development of pre-colonial cities and states in sub-Saharan Africa (see, for example, his *African civilizations* book, 1987). In that part of the world, the emergence of cities and commerce is most often linked to major kingdoms. From Benin to Kibiro, Graham's career and publications illustrate well this interconnection. For example, when studying salt-making at Kibiro, he links it in his concluding pages to the origins and growth of the Bunyoro kingdom (Connah 1996, 216–217).

Indeed, kingship played a major role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of Africa. This is also true for many parts of the world nowadays. Frankly, we must admit that, in one way or another, we are still fascinated by kingship. Today's 'royals' are still an inexhaustible goldmine for the media. So, I strongly believe that among the many possible trajectories to complexity, the one leading to kingship should get much more attention from archaeologists, historians and anthropologists alike.

The essence of kingship in Africa

Since the seminal book *Beyond chiefdoms: pathways to complexity in Africa*, edited by Susan McIntosh (1999a), it is obvious that we need to move away from evolutionary models (McIntosh 1999b, 4). We have also come to realise that there is huge variability in modes of complex organisations and in forms of power. Hierarchies are very flexible, multiple and more or less overlapping. In addition, complexity can be achieved horizontally rather than vertically, with recourse to elaborate and intricate associations instead of vertically controlled hierarchies (McIntosh 1999b).

Yet, in several instances and in many parts of Africa, some individuals attained power and importance by becoming the 'big men' of their community, and eventually the king. As Alouise da Cadamosto noted as early as the fifteenth century in West Africa, the leadership of those individuals rested on something very unusual for a European of that time: 'Such men are not lords by virtue of treasure or money, for they possess neither . . . but on account of ceremonies and the following of people, they may truly be called lords' (Crone 1937, 37). Cadamosto clearly perceived that the pre-eminence of 'ceremonies' and the importance of the 'following of people' were at the core of the notion of power in Africa.

In the establishment of many supralocal polities, African data support the importance of ritual and symbolic power rather than economic or political power, as well as the importance of appealing to a large group of followers and casting a wide 'social network'. Guyer and Belinga (1995, 106) have rightly drawn attention to the fact that the concept of wealth-in-people rather than wealth-in-things, the latter being more familiar to Westerners, may be misleading. According to them, the goal was not to accumulate a labour force nor material things, but rather the ability to mobilise various knowledge and skills in order to be successful in a challenging environment. In Guyer and Belinga's view, leadership is the capacity to do this effectively, and they propose to call this dynamic 'composition' rather than accumulation. This leads McIntosh (1999b, 16) to suggest that '. . . leadership in many African societies involves the composition of a network of social and ritual power.' Ritual power and social networks appear to be at the core of the very notion of power in Africa, even if the use of the term 'composition' in the way Guyer and Belinga (1995) suggest seems to carry some functionalist undertone, with once again a primary concern for subsistence and mode of production. To have a large body of followers may be more prestigious than utilitarian in the view of many Africans.

This should not be a surprise, as kinship was at the base of every subsequent social and political development. Various real or fictive kinship ties linked the members of a multitude of self-conscious local communities of different sizes. It was kinship that provided the underlying organisational structure of the whole society. The success of a group composed of the descendants of a real or putative ancestor

was a key element that shaped societies and ideologies as a whole. Often, as in the case of the societies reconstructed so vividly by Vansina (1990, 166) in Equatorial Africa, '... the political organisation was based originally on two contradictory ideological principles at once: one asserting the supernatural powers of leaders and the other the equality of all people.'

Contrary to what one may expect, and despite those contradictory principles, this type of organisation proved to be relatively stable over long periods, because, as suggested by Vansina (1999), its balance of power was based on competition and co-operation between leaders of roughly the same strength. When the balance of power was disrupted by some demographic change or access to special resources, the competing leader could always move away to an unpopulated area (Vansina 1990, 252). In the long run, when this equilibrium was broken, possibly because one of the 'big men' was able to attract some follower or to accumulate more wealth, or because he was exceptionally talented, new political developments occurred. However, the outcomes of those developments were very diverse. In some areas, they produced acceleration in the growth of the scale of the polities and a drive toward a higher degree of centralisation, but in many other instances the desire for local autonomy prevailed despite the threat to security. In those numerous latter cases, the old tradition of the equality of all was the more potent (Vansina 1990, 252–253, 1999).

Obviously, the path from local community to state was not straightforward and systematic. In Central Africa, in the few instances where states finally emerged, they proved to be ephemeral. On the whole, political systems kept moving back and forth, from lineage to chiefdom and kingdom (Vansina 1990, 1999). This challenges neo-evolutionary theories of political formation and simplistic models of one-way trajectories to complexity. Africa's past and present display an impressive array of political creativity on the many pathways to complexity ... and return from it! Hence, as stressed also by Vansina (1999, 169) '... evolutionary theory has no predictive value and should not be used by archaeologists to extrapolate a sequence of developments toward greater centralization'. As McIntosh (1999b) points out in her introduction to *Beyond chiefdoms: pathways to complexity in Africa*, an African perspective on the variation and organisation of complex societies has much to offer archaeological theory in general. More specifically, by broadening our empirical database for the study of complexity, it may be useful in our search for evidence of vertical or horizontal differentiation in the archaeological record. From this perspective, a better understanding of how complex society emerges in the absence of a central authority would be very relevant, but very challenging as well, in the absence of a deep understanding of those systems too often overlooked (McIntosh 1999b). However, in studying various political developments in Africa, especially from an archaeological perspective, it may be easier to focus first on the search for evidence of hierarchical differentiation. In this perspective, understanding how and why a kinship-based egalitarian society transforms itself into a centralised state with a king remains a major topic of investigation.

The names of the major kingdoms that flourished throughout the continent in the past still resound in the minds of many: Mali, Ghana, Sokoto, Borno, Asante, Dahomey, Bamun, Loango, Kongo, Kuba, Luba, Lunda, Lozi, Rwanda, Ganda, Nyoro, Zimbabwe, Monomatapa, etc. Their history and memory continue to shape the present political and cultural landscape of numerous modern states. In the view of many Africans and members of the African Diaspora, they epitomise the great

deeds of their ancestors before colonial days. Paradoxically, what is one of the most significant aspects of the past for Africans has received only scant attention from archaeologists. Little is known about the origin of those kingdoms, although a book like *Kingdoms of the savanna* was published over forty years ago (Vansina 1966).

It is high time, then, to use archaeology to document more systematically the origins of those major kingdoms and states. To achieve that, we need a better understanding of the nature of kingship. From an anthropological perspective, the emergence of kingship marks a radical rupture with kinship, as illustrated by what was said to the Kuba king during his accession:

> 'Let go of your kin. You belonged to your mother's clan. Now you are your own clan. Kill [renounce] your father. Kill [renounce] your mother. What is forbidden is a female king' (Vansina 1978, 121).

According to Luc de Heusch (1997, 231) who, as an anthropologist, has been working on the topic of sacred kingship in Africa for many years:

> 'Sacred kingship is a symbolic device, an illusory mechanism of production with the capacity to drive economic development. It transforms the mode of domestic production by imposing tribute and by exercising control over a group's relations with the outside world. Sacred kingship is thus a fundamental factor in history, a history in which the political and the magico-religious are intimately intertwined.'

But in de Heusch's view, and this is fundamental:

> 'It is the ritual function, not the political, which is at the core of the institution for it appears already in small, stateless societies where a man, or even a child, is torn from the everyday kingship order to take on the heavy responsibility of guaranteeing the equilibrium of the universe. The prosperity which ensues from this reflects in turn upon the affairs of humankind' (de Heusch 1997, 231).

Vesting a given person with key responsibilities in order to ascertain collective prosperity thanks to rituals appears to be crucial in the process. As stressed by de Heusch (1997, 230):

> 'A ritual function such as this should not be understood as the ideological super-structure of the state, any more than it should be interpreted as an altered form of some ancient political and military authority. In fact it tends to appear, as among the Dogon of Mali, in societies which have no knowledge even of embryonic state forms. In another lineage society with no political centre, the Samo of Burkina Faso, it is in the interior of each village that the same symbolic mechanism emerges in the figure of the *tyiri*, master of the rain.'

There are many other examples of this throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and, in fact, the world, where a figure is literally being 'distinguished' and vested with special ritual responsibilities in order to attain collective prosperity. This led de Heusch (1997, 230) to conclude that 'the sacralization of power precedes the birth of the state.'

From that perspective, sacred kingship appears to be less a particular type of political organisation than a new type of social organisation, resulting from the need to achieve collective prosperity thanks to rituals. By that logic, it is thus hardly surprising that the sacred chief or king must stand outside the kinship order. Often,

the elaborate enthronement procedure, by bestowing a central ritual function on the figure of the new 'sovereign', stresses the symbolic rupture that must take place. He must be torn from the bosom of his family, from his own kinship. This is often achieved by a real or symbolic transgression of some fundamental rule of the social order (de Heusch 1997). This transgression, which is usually a key component of the enthronement, is often achieved by having an incestuous more or less symbolic relationship (de Heusch 1958; 1982, 16–26, 301–303), by committing a murder or by cannibalism (de Heusch 1997).

It does not appear that increasing sacralisation necessarily results from an evolutionary process, as there are also examples of some desacralisation processes of power (de Heusch 2002, 191–202), but the reinforcement of the sacrality of power usually goes hand in hand with the development of the state. Breaking away from the traditional order of kinship should be seen as the necessary, if not sufficient, condition to the emergence of a new politico-symbolic structure, to the transformation of chiefship into kingship (de Heusch 1987, 289). This break may well not be as radical as suggested by de Heusch, as often it is one pre-eminent kinship group in the person of a clan or a lineage leader that will exploit the sacrality of power to transform the chiefdom into a full fledged kingdom, with its various political, economical, judiciary and military features.

Historical linguistics tell us a similar story, which has been outlined in fascinating detail by David Schoenbrun (1999) in his work on the history of the Great Lakes region of East Africa. This allows us to return to an area of Africa more familiar to Graham Connah. Schoenbrun's research tells us of the existence in the area of two parallel concepts of power, best summarised in the form of a table (Table 1).

Over time, people transformed instrumental power into creative power, and *vice-versa*, as occurrences of semantic shifts testify. As Schoenbrun (1999) suggests, the joining of creative and instrumental power was first achieved in the person of chief and healer, and the resulting 'chiefship' or 'royalty' started in some areas well before the ninth century AD. The process of the fusion of both powers was achieved in the person of a sacred ruler. This sacred chief, or king, then became the interface between the material and the cultural orders.

It must be stressed that the term 'sacred' is more appropriate than 'divine', because in Sub-Saharan Africa, contrary to some other parts of the world, this ruler is usually not a living god but rather a sort of 'living fetish'. In this perspective, the term 'sacred' is well suited, as it harks back to its original Latin meaning. Following Benvéniste (1969, 188), it meant 'august and accursed', as well as 'worthy of

Table 1. Differences between instrumental and creative power.

Instrumental Power	Creative Power
Secures power through the control of people's action	Manipulates and invents forms of meaning
Getting people to do things	Making people believe
The power of order	The power of putting into order
Importance of kinship	Importance of ritual and symbolic power
Big man, chief	Healer
Safety	Fecundity/fertility

veneration and exciting horror'. A symbolic monster, the sacred ruler is both benevolent and malevolent.

Often in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is thanks to the ritual of investiture that the body of the would-be king is sacralised. By the power invested in him, he becomes the interface between nature and culture, safeguarding world order (de Heusch 2005). As a living fetish, his body becomes literally the 'embodiment' of his kingdom. In the process, the king ends up incarnating both the power and the existence of the state.

The personification of power that occurs is a powerful factor of cohesion for the community from which it emanates. The leader incarnates the group, but the group incarnates itself in its leader everywhere, and today, as in the past, the arrival of a new leader revives organisation and states (Abeles 1990, 101; Russ 1994, 319). So on the whole, and in stark contrast with the Western world, ritual, social and charismatic authority was more important than control and coercion in shaping African polities, the ritual reach of which often extended far beyond their core area. This is what Southall (1988, 1999) called a 'segmentary state'.

Sometimes the sacred ruler reigned over a ritual centre, or just his palace, but did not govern. In the case of the magnificent and powerful Luba kingdom, which flourished in the southeastern savannas of Central Africa in the second millennium AD, there was probably not even a single dynastic line or a single centre, but rather a constellation of chieftaincies and office-holders revolving around what may have been a largely mythical center (Nooter 1991; Nooter Roberts and Roberts 1996a; de Maret 1999). Yet belief in this system allowed integration of an area the size of England. A rich array of regalia, emblems and sacred objects symbolising Luba royal power were sought after and used in legitimising the authority of the heads of the numerous and largely autonomous communities on the peripheries (Childs and de Maret 1996; Nooter Roberts and Roberts 1996b; de Maret 1999).

An archaeological perspective

From an archaeological perspective, in front of such a wide and flexible spectrum of ritual and political organisations, what should we be looking at? To study the origins of the major kingdoms, it is crucial to attempt to identify the sacred dimension of power in the African archaeological record. This may be achieved by carefully considering the layout of palaces and precolonial cities, as well as sacred landscapes and burial centres. Oral traditions, early descriptions or etchings made by the first traders, explorers and missionaries are invaluable in this respect. Using their accounts, and using topography and what is eventually left above the ground (old trees, ruins, mounds), one can locate the capitals of major kingdoms and reconstruct their layout, and thus know where to excavate and what to expect. A very good example of this is Mbanza Kongo, the former capital of the Kongo kingdom that was first visited in 1491 by the Portuguese (de Maret 2006, Figure 1).

Symbols of individual position and role may be inferred from a large array of regalia that often end up as grave goods. In that perspective, a thorough ethnographic and historical inventory of what was used in a given cultural area as objects of prestige and the subject of long distance trade is always invaluable, such as the one provided by Vansina (1973) for the peoples of the Lower Kwilu. Among the most significant regalia, the iron bells, especially the double-bell, deserve special attention in a large part of western, central and eastern Africa (Vansina 1969). The
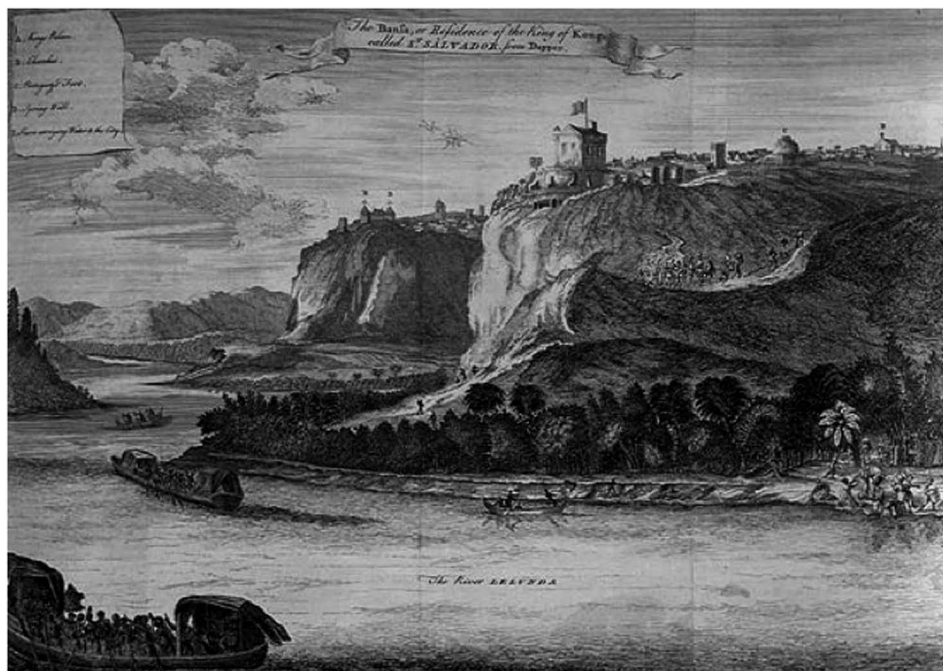
Figure 1. Etching of Mbanza Kongo, the former capital of the Kongo kingdom (after Cavazzi 1665).

flywhisk and parasol are also noteworthy, especially in West Africa. Remains of powerful or 'good food-for-thought' animals, like lions, leopards and other spotted felines (in the form of canines, claws, or hides), elephants, eagles, pangolins and aardvarks deserve special attention, as those animals are often closely associated with power, their body being usually the equivalent of the sacred chief or king's body (de Heusch 1986, 56–57, 60–63, 157–160; de Maret 2005).

As we have seen, it is often the body of the king or chief that is sacralised, becoming a kind of a living-fetish. Both as an object and a subject, he will play a central role in rituals and discourses. The best archaeologically documented example of this is the grave of Cyirima Rujugira, a king of Rwanda who died in the eighteenth century AD and whose body was kept over a smoking fire to be cured and completely mummified for over two centuries before his burial in a leopard skin, *c.* 1930, surrounded by several regalia (Van Noten 1972, 1982, 74–75). Next to his skull rested two iron anvils (Figure 2), a common form of regalia and a metaphorical reminder that throughout the southern savannas of Central Africa, from the Atlantic Coast to the Great Lakes, the king was a kind of ritual blacksmith. Usually the first king was regarded as the first blacksmith, and mimicking his work by striking two anvils against each other was a crucial part of enthronement rituals (de Maret 1985).

A seventeenth-century coloured plate shows us the first king of Kongo smithing ceremonial axes, with a band of musicians playing in the background (Cavazzi 1665, figure 7) (Figure 3). The presence of an iron anvil next to the skull in one of the eighth- to tenth-century Ingombe Ilede graves from Zambia (Fagan *et al.* 1969, 66 plate 3a-b), as well as the presence of an anvil in a similar context in a ninth-century Early Kisalian
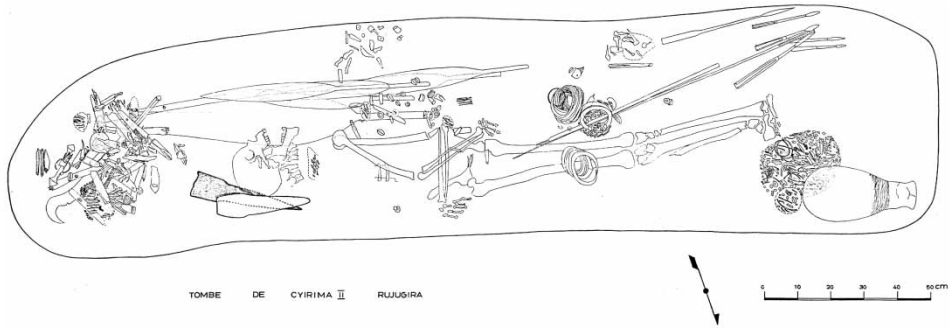
Figure 2. Grave of King Cyirima Rujugira (after Van Noten 1972).

grave from the Upemba Depression in the Democratic Republic of Congo (de Maret 1992, 30–35), testify to the extent of the practice both spatially and through time (de Maret 1985) (Figure 4). Ceremonial axes are also common regalia and can be regarded as a marker of authority when discovered as grave goods, sometimes in association with the anvil (de Maret 1999).

Another important category of objects of prestige are currencies fabricated out of copper, iron, shells, beads, raffia cloth or salt cakes in a bewildering variety of shapes and sizes. Generally used for special purposes rather than day-to-day transactions, and thus circulating in restricted spheres, they also testify to practices linked to the prestige and the authority of rulers. Used for tribute, accumulation of wealth, bridewealth, access to secret and ritual societies or grave goods, they often show up in the archaeological records. To the east, disks made out of the circumvallated base of a *Conus* shell were an important symbol of authority for at least the last millennium (Fagan *et al.* 1969, 138; Hiernaux *et al.* 1972). Copper ingots in the shape of crosses also became a significant symbol, not only of wealth but also of political authority, over large territories from Katanga to Zimbabwe (de Maret 1981, 1995; Swan 2007) (Figure 5).

Many other objects that could be linked to kings or chiefs but that are less likely to show up in the archaeological record must also be mentioned: ceremonial seats, caps, staffs, cups, horns, ritual baskets and so on. But they may not be necessarily related to political power, a point well made by McIntosh (1999b, 11–14) for whom 'associations such as secret societies and title-taking associations provide an arena [. . .] in Africa, for the elaboration of individualistic displays of prestige and wealth. These displays may be linked to political influence or power, but can also be used to channel wealth and ambition in such a way to impede political consolidation.' From that perspective, one can concur with her and with Shaw (1977) in his interpretation of the famous late first-millennium AD Igbo Ukwu burial and deposit from southeastern Nigeria. It is possible indeed that the individual buried there seated on a stool, with a copper crown, a pectoral, bracelets and anklets, staffs, fan, tusk and numerous imported beads 'was a high status title-holder in a non-hierarchically organized society' (McIntosh 1999b, 12). However, as McIntosh (1999b, 12) goes on to stress the possibility of 'a persuasive, non-hierarchical alternative interpretation' poses a challenge for archaeologists in an African context, especially in areas where, as in the Igbo Ukwu case, title-taking in the absence of political centralisation is well-documented through ethnography, hence the importance of moving back through time when possible (Stahl 1993).

Figure 3. The first king of Kongo smithing with musicians (after Cavazzi 1665, figure 7).

But once again, from an African rather than a European perspective, as we have seen, the sacrality of an individual may not be directly linked to his political power. This also evokes Netting's (1972) argument that the religious dimension may well be crucial in focusing power in what he sees, with some functionalist overtones, as an efficient way to overcome the structural flows of non-centralised societies (Netting 1972, 233; McIntosh 1999a, 14). It remains difficult to know in a given case, from several centuries ago, whether the sacrality of power was instrumentalised by an
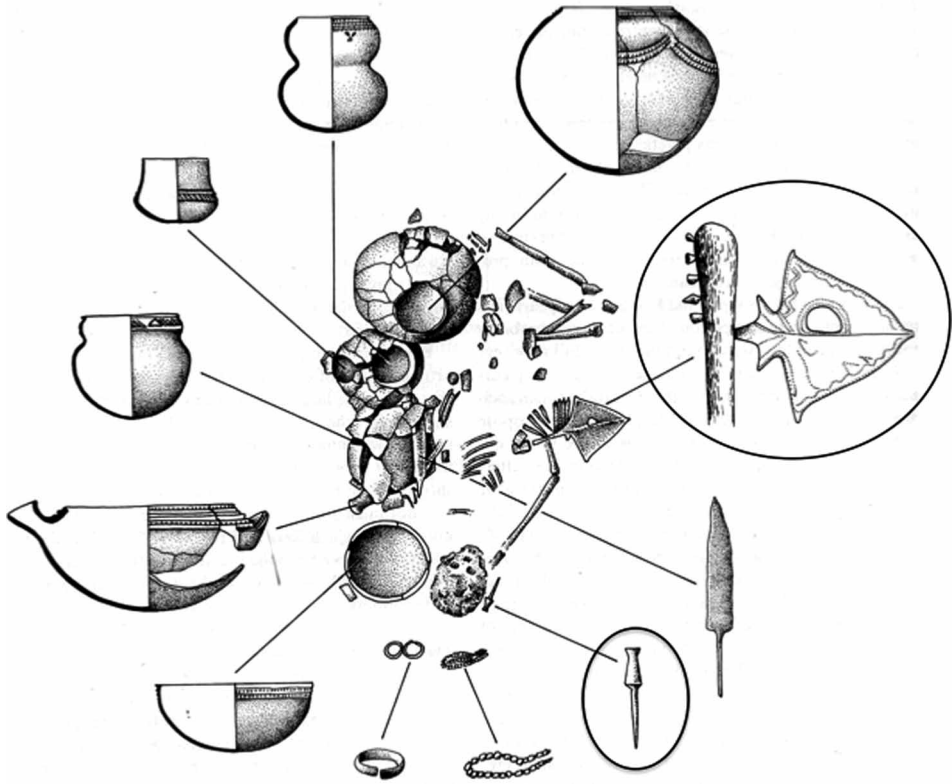
Figure 4. Ninth-century Early Kisalian grave with an anvil and a ceremonial axe (after de Maret 1985).

ambitious individual to transcend the family and political order, or if it was the sacralisation of a chosen individual that was the stepping stone of further political development and complexification. The sacred is part of the essence of power and their interplay is always elusive, even in our modern states.

To go back to the possible archaeological evidence of sacred power, one must consider ritual practice, before or during internment, such as the ritual killing of the king, his wives or some of his followers or slaves. As Frazer's (1913–1915) illuminating work on the topic has shown, after a given lapse of time or if he becomes ill or disabled, the sacred king will often be put to death. The circumstances of this death may also be revealing of its sacred nature. In several instances, the blood of the king could not be spilled and he was thus choked or suffocated.

Whatever the archaeological evidence of sacred power that shaped African history could be, it is worth all our attention in line with Graham Connah's pursuits. We should plan to excavate systematically at the core and at the periphery of the major kingdoms of Africa. In general, we should also pay more attention to the material remains of rituals and symbols, if we want to understand better the socio-historical processes that have been so important in shaping Africa's past. We may never be able from a purely archaeological perspective to distinguish the various paths to complexity and kingship, but by scrutinising the archaeological record, if we are able to find evidence of some sacralisation process, it may well be as significant
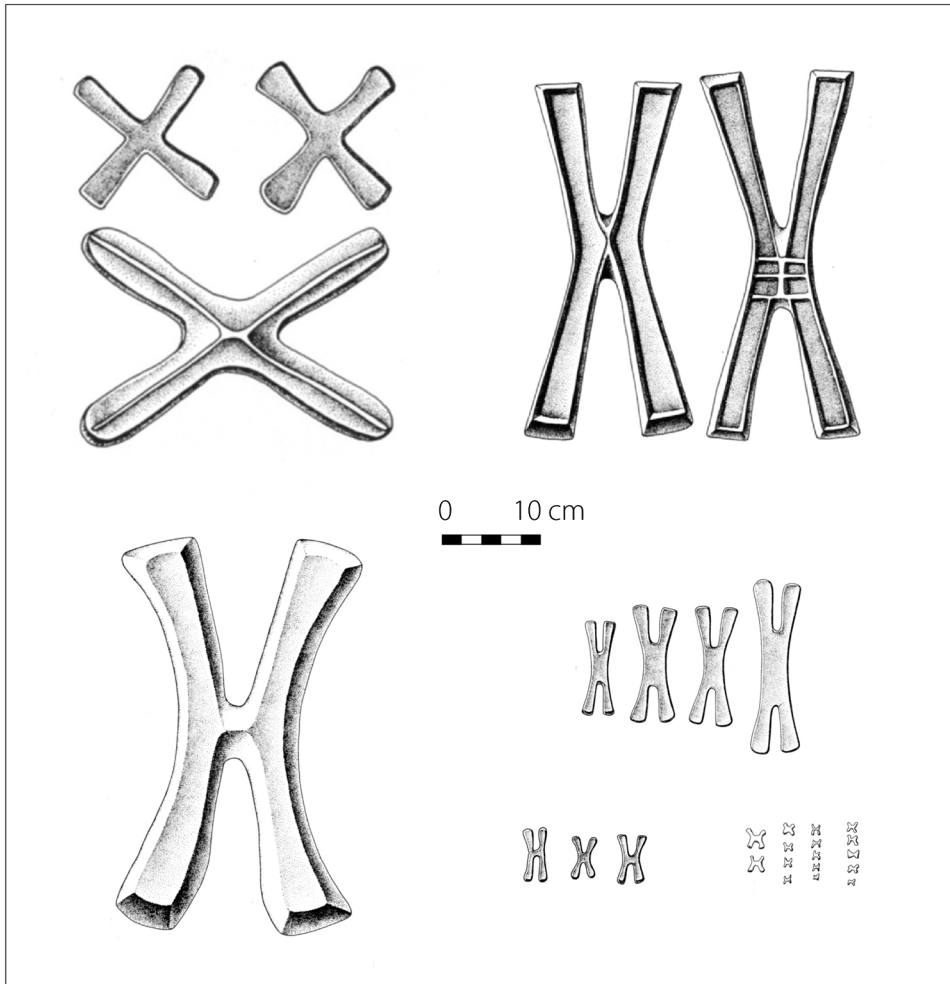
Figure 5. Copper ingots in the shape of cross (after de Maret 1995).

from an African perspective, focused as it is on ritual power and collective action rather than on the individual and secular power as it is in the Western world.

Note on contributor

Pierre de Maret is Professor of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Belgium, and a member of the Belgian Royal Academy. His research interests have focused on the archaeology of Central Africa, rainforest conservation and cultural heritage management. He holds several honorary degrees.

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